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C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 001187

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SY](#) [SP](#)
SUBJECT: SYRIAN MEDIA BANNER RELATIONSHIP WITH SPAIN

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche for reasons 1.4 b/d

11. (U) Since late January, official Syrian media have played up stories involving Spain, asserting strengthened relations between the two countries. Examples of some of these stories include a February 26 story about a Spanish grant of more than USD one million for rural health centers, a March 2 story about Spain's King Carlos' meeting with the outgoing Syrian Ambassador to Madrid Mohsin Bilal, and a March 9 story about a Spanish company that won a USD 516 million contract to build a power plant in northeastern Syria. A March 1 story in the daily Syria Times described a meeting between Spanish FM Moratinos and Bilal, who is Syria's new Information Minister, in which Moratinos reportedly expressed "Spain's readiness to offer aid expertise to support the process of modernization and building Syria is witnessing."

12. (C) A Spanish diplomat in Damascus dismissed the string of news reports as an unwelcome consequence of Minister Bilal's most previous job as Ambassador to Spain. Bilal scheduled his farewell meetings with Spanish officials so that he had one meeting a day, which could be covered in the Syrian media, the diplomat said. Spain's policy toward Syria remains in line with that of the European Union, with its foremost demand that the SARG comply with the UNIIIC investigation, insisted the diplomat.

13. (C) Nevertheless, FM Moratinos believes that if the SARG cooperates with the investigation, international engagement should follow, the diplomat said. That conviction is linked to Moratinos' previous assignment as the EU's Special Representative to the Middle East, the diplomat added. When asked about plans for Moratinos to visit Damascus, the diplomat carefully responded, "Not that I'm aware of in his professional capacity." The diplomat said he was not aware of a rumored visit by the Spanish Queen to the northern Syrian city of Aleppo, which inaugurated March 18 its role as this year's capital of Islamic culture. The Queen, who visited Aleppo often during her teen-age years, and the King have developed a liking for the Syrian President and First Lady, the diplomat said.

14. (C) Comment: Syrian media tend to play up events that undermine the impression of the country's isolation from the rest of the international community. In recent months, these stories have focused not only on Syria's relations with Spain, but also with reported improvements in its ties to Turkey and Russia. The Spanish diplomat may be correct in his assessment that the new Syrian Minister of Information is capitalizing on his Spanish contacts to lend the impression of strengthened bilateral ties, but even so, Moratinos is the only EU FM to have visited Damascus since Lebanese PM

Hariri's assassination in February 2005. Moratinos' March 7 "refueling stop" in Syria included a meeting with Syrian FM Mu'allim. That meeting took place several days after the SARG rather unceremoniously closed a EU-sponsored human rights center and barely a month after protesters, encouraged by SARG signals, burned or damaged three European embassies. The SARG will likely continue to encourage Spain to serve, as described in official media here, as a bridge between the Arab world and the European Union.

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